UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

PROGRAMME: No. 597, recorded 15 September 1995

GUEST: **Samir SANBAR**
Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information

JOURNALISTS: Trevor Rowe, National Public Radio
Barbara Crossette, *The New York Times*

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

THE MEDIA AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Samir SANBAR, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information, discusses the work of the United Nations and its relationship with the media. Information plays a vital role in the lives of people in all parts of the world. Reporting on the activities of the world organization reflects the cultural diversity of the international media. The United Nations is working on joint ventures with news institutions to further enhance cooperation between the two.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
Executive Producer:	Kamil Taha
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

In this fiftieth anniversary year, few would disagree that the United Nations is in the public eye as never before. It is involved in an increasingly wide range of activities, many of them controversial, at a time when the influence of the media and information in general is growing in importance and complexity.

Our guest today is in the centre of United nations efforts to explain its role in our rapidly changing world. He is Samir Sanbar, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Sanbar Are Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*. Mr. Sanbar, welcome to World Chronicle.

SANBAR: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sanbar, the phrase "public information" sometimes is equated with public relations. Do you eschew public relations and concentrate on public information, or is there an element of public relations in your activities, particularly at a time when, as we've noted, the United Nations is very much in the public eye, but is of course also getting a fair amount of criticism from various sources?

SANBAR: Well, you know, there is of course an element of public relations in the work of the UN. But somehow when the founding fathers of the UN started this attempt to reach out to the, quote, "peoples of the world", unquote, it was assumed that there should be no public relations. That's why they called it public information. In fact, I recall when I first joined the UN -- and I was a journalist -- one of my colleagues suggested the title of public relations officer, and this was refused. They said, no, the UN may not need public relations, it needs only just give public information, and the public should be attached to these very important and idealistic principles.

Of course, now, with the changing world and with developments in the world today, especially with communications becoming a central element in decision-making, public relations is a very important element. I would call it, in fact, communications and outreach as much as just public relations. Because sometimes public relations connotes, or it gives the idea that it's mainly having some contacts with people, networking, and so forth. I would go beyond that. I say communications as an important element of reaching out to the public.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the attitude of the media toward the UN? Do you think that the UN's getting a fair shake on the whole? There is a lot of critical writing about the Organization. But on the whole, do you feel that the press is fair to the UN?

SANBAR: I think the press is trying to do a job. It's true, they're supposed to cover what they see in the UN, and it's a two-way street. I think the journalists would like to follow up what's happening, and UN should try to give as much information as possible on its activities. Sometimes these activities may not be thrilling to the media. About 80 per cent of the UN is the economic and social field, which is not a very thrilling element of the UN work. I would say 80 per cent of the positive work of the UN and the effective work of the UN is in the economic and social field, which ranges from survival to a quality of life, and so forth. So it's really a wide range of activity. Yet, the most written about or watched element is the political role of the UN, where we are obviously vulnerable. And there is a misperception that the UN is mainly involved in peace-keeping, and even in that area it's just that they're involved in two or three peace-keeping operations, while in reality there are about 17 peace-keeping operations. And, of course, there is the economic and social area of the UN, which is very important.

Yet the media does its best by trying to cover what they can cover. And I think no matter what they write about the UN, it's our job to try to give them as much information as possible, to be accessible as much as possible, and to approach their work with the concept that we are in it together. They are our allies, and I think the more they know about the UN the better they can cover it and the better image they give about the UN.

LITTLEJOHNS: Trevor Rowe.

ROWE: Well, since the end of the cold war, the UN has enjoyed some notable successes, in Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador. But recently you've also had a string of failures. You've had a failure to intervene forcefully in Rwanda, and of course you have Somalia, and you have Bosnia. How do you deal with these issues, especially since the failure to explain the UN's role has led to a sharp drop in support for this body? At least among the American public the polls show that. How do you combat that?

SANBAR: I would say that the general public in the US and elsewhere generally has a supportive attitude towards the UN in principle. It's the activities of the UN that sometimes are criticized or reviewed with a critical view, though the UN was successful in the places you mentioned -- Namibia, Salvador, Mozambique, Eritrea and elsewhere, mainly I think because there was the political will to support the UN. Because the UN on its own does not have its separate operations. I mean, the UN depends very much

on Member States and the support by Member States, the provision of not only troops and finances, but a sustained and continued political will to carry any operation through until the end.

So these activities which you mentioned about recent events, Bosnia and to a certain extent in Rwanda, the UN can't do it alone. It has to have the support of the Member States who participate in these missions and participate through military, financial and political sides. On the other hand, I would mention that the UN's humanitarian role in these areas has been very substantive. In the area of Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia, I think the UN helps about 2 million people and brings food to many of these people. In Rwanda, the same thing. We are dealing with a situation where you have increased demands and decreased resources.

ROWE: I'd just like to follow that up, because I have noticed over the years that there is, or there tends to be here an institutional passivity when it comes to getting its message across. We really saw that in Somalia, when you did have the support of the international community. The international community said to you, "We don't want you to be a traditional peace-keeping operation, we want you to use force in order to tame this country, to put it back together." You used force, and all of a sudden people in the US Congress, around the world, were saying, "Oh, but those peace-keepers are shooting. They shouldn't be doing that. They're peace-keepers." And this organization did not then come out to explain this new role it had been given. It was passive, and as a consequence political opposition grew. What happened there? Why did you remain passive?

SANBAR: Well, there are two areas there. One is that whatever you can do in the field is whatever you are able to do through the resources given to you, whether it's material, financial, soldiers or political support. The other thing is explaining your viewpoint to a public. We are limited by the need to explain our position without offending too many Member States. Because if you work for a government you are entitled to go out and explain the position of the government. We are dealing with 185 Member States, and therefore whatever you come out and speak about is often handicapped or limited by your ability to explain a situation which may not be always supportive of the position of one Member State or the other. The other aspect I want to mention is that peace-keeping itself is no longer just a peace-keeping operation in the traditional sense. Before -- and I worked in some peace-keeping operations -- there were agreements between two Member States or three Member States to supervise a border, to look at the area and see, well, we are observing and reporting. UNIFIL, UNDOF and other places. That worked. Now, peace-keeping operations are not just

peace-keeping. They have a humanitarian component; they have a political component. And more important, you're not dealing only with governments, you have warlords involved, you have all sorts of non-governmental groups involved. So it's not only that you are observing and reporting, you are now put in a position where sometimes you are placed within borders of certain countries, not just along the borders.

So peace-keeping is becoming more and more complex, and, in a changing world, there is a changing role for the UN and a changing perception of the role that the UN can do.

CROSSETTE: To follow on Somalia raises the whole issue of the relationship with the United States. You mentioned 185 member nations, and you can't be too careful in not criticizing one or another. Well, one in particular, in the case of Somalia, has apparently left the impression in the public mind here that what happened in Somalia that caused the death of a group of young American Marines had something to do with the UN, when in fact, as everyone knows, it was an entirely American operation and all the decisions involved in it were American. Now, there's a case where the UN did not jump, and perhaps could not jump directly into the media and say, "Let's straighten this out. These are the people who made the decisions." Weeks later some American newspapers did, including mine. But that's one case I think, isn't it, where the UN is really caught in a very awkward situation where in order to clear your name or to in fact put the position involves this very tricky ground of getting in the way of a country that may be powerful and can act in some way that would be harmful to the UN?

SANBAR: Well, I think that point gets to the core of our outreach situation and the way we are supposed to handle matters. And I think -- I would like to come back to what I said earlier, that we in the UN in public information and the media have a joint objective of trying to work together. Because in certain cases we've got to provide you with information, or facilitate your getting to the bottom of a story. And your role has been, of course, very clear and straightforward and very helpful. And this is why I've always said that the UN and the media, or the UN information machinery and the media covering the UN are in fact two sides of the coin, in the sense that we have to work together, we have to give you more information about what is available, what is happening, and you look at it and you decide what should be the story, what should be said, what should not be said. You are more able, more free. We do not have the political freedom to go into such issues, which you, as a free media in a democratic society, have more leeway to report.

CROSSETTE: And another thing about the United States and the UN, as you know there's been a lot of opinion in various quarters that the UN is somehow a danger

to American sovereignty -- one hears this in other countries too. But here it seems odd, because we're the host country and the UN is just around the corner from most people. I'm wondering if, in an age where there's so much personality cult in politics and television and so on, the UN doesn't just appear faceless to so many Americans. I think everyone would agree in principle. Most people would say here the UN is a good thing and we certainly don't want to abolish it, but then on the other hand you hear these terrible stories about UN tanks in Montana and all sorts of weird things. And there are no personalities that exemplify the UN, there are no people who come forward and speak for the UN. It's very difficult to promote the UN or project the UN as a group of human beings here doing a lot of different things. Is this a problem in, for example, does the Secretary-General not want to be too public? Is it difficult to find people to speak for the UN? Is it just the way each national media organization works, that you can't sort of insert someone at a time when you might want to put a face and a human being in a UN story?

SANBAR: I think you're right. To make the public more aware of a given situation, it has to be personified, it's got to be linked with a human face. And that's why you may note that most reports now about UN activities in the social field are always saying "development with a human face", "children with a human face". But basically, you are right. The more we can hang some of the UN issues on individuals, on people, the better we are communicating. The thing is that the Secretary-General is very keen on meeting with the media, he is open, he would like to have as much contact with the media as possible, but he also has other duties in his capacity as the Secretary-General of the UN. The Secretary-General of the UN is the representative, if you wish, or the personification of the work of the Secretariat, and he can do much. But the more we can get the UN tied to individuals and people, and have human interest stories, the better we can do. And I think the point is well taken. We're trying in fact to do that, not just in the political field now, but in the economic and social field. Because this is where you have lots of positive UN work. And, as I said, it's not just a question of improving the environment, but there are areas of survival where the UN is very much involved. And the more we can get it linked to individuals and people, the better. And in fact, I am trying to discuss with my colleagues in various agencies, like UNESCO, ILO, FAO, UNICEF, UNDP, how we can all work together to pool our resources and deal with these issues, and give them a human face and a lively human face.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Samir Sanbar, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information. Mr. Sanbar, Barbara mentioned the guys in the militias who were alleging that the United Nations was training people to take over

the country in Montana and various other places. Did you address these allegations, which of course are totally without foundation? I mean, it seems to me that these guys were getting away with it and the UN was doing nothing in response. Or am I mistaken?

SANBAR: No, I think the UN responded, clarified, but I think in a way it's an internal matter of the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: No, but it's not an internal matter when they're accusing the United Nations of doing these things.

SANBAR: The UN explained that this was not the case, and tried its best to tell all the media that this is not the case. And I think the US authorities also helped by clarifying the situation to the public. We saw correspondents about the matter, sent them to the US Mission, and to others, and we tried to explain it to the public as much as possible.

ROWE: Mr. Sanbar, I'd like to ask you, going back to this role or this lack of a pro-active role on the part of the UN, yes, the UN is the creature of 185 governments. It is limited institutionally in terms of what it can do. But nonetheless, it does have an institutional ego. And I'm just wondering, in things that pertain to the UN -- for example, we noticed there were the fiftieth anniversary celebrations in San Francisco to mark the founding of the Charter, and we saw there basically what was a public relations disaster. All the coverage, or a significant amount of that coverage leading up to the celebration was marked by criticism of the UN -- that the UN is mismanaged, there's duplication, no reform, et cetera. And why -- I'm just curious -- as a communications strategy, why wasn't the UN ahead of that curve? Why didn't it go into that event saying we have decided to do this, that and the other thing in order to insure that there is no duplication, to make sure that our machine is streamlined?

SANBAR: You know, San Francisco events were actually handled by the American authorities in San Francisco, not the UN. The point is taken, though, that there is a need to make a pro-active effort in that area. And I think we're trying now in various areas, various fields. One, we're trying to get on the international communications highway. We're using electronic mail as much as possible, electronic media as much as possible, TV and so forth, and that is an area where we're getting in recently, but we are getting into. And that would insure that we reach out to as wide a public as possible. We're trying now to reach out as much as possible to media institutions, not just journalists here, but to make joint ventures with TV stations, radio stations, newspapers around the world to see how best we can --

LITTLEJOHNS: But you're going to be taking away our bread and butter if you do that. If you go directly to our head offices, I mean, why do you need correspondents here?

SANBAR: In fact, what we're doing is strengthening your role. We make a contact with the institution to insure that they have a person here with whom we can work well, and we support the role of the correspondents here, because they are our main contact with all the media institutions around the world. So we are trying in fact to consolidate the role of the media here, by telling your head office that we are very happy you are here, we're available, could we have joint projects together? Could we have ideas we can exchange? We are also trying to finesse our publications, focus on one or two issues where there are some UN success stories --

LITTLEJOHNS: The Blue Books.

SANBAR: The Blue Books -- Mozambique, Salvador, --

LITTLEJOHNS: Apartheid.

SANBAR: -- Apartheid, where the UN played a very positive role. So we have cut down lots of other publications which are not really that, in my opinion, effective. And just focus on certain issues and books which are of use to us.

Briefly, one of the things to do, to follow up on what you have been saying -- and I agree with you, is to sharpen our focus on specific issues, and streamline our managerial ability to deal with certain aspects which are becoming more and more relevant these days in the media world -- TV, electronic media, press -- but on specific issues with which we can deal.

CROSSETTE: How hard is it to work in an information -- run an information system where there are so many different cultural views of the role of the press, the journalists, the TV cameraman, as an intruder, from society, with societies where people have complete contempt, or even have oppressed the press, and have all these people together here? Is this a problem, in trying to get people to understand how the press works in large parts of the world, because they don't come from that tradition?

SANBAR: I think it's a challenge. And in fact it's a thrilling challenge. Because this is, after all, what the United Nations is about -- it's different cultures, different backgrounds, and I think the fact that we are working in a free society. So we will try to make it more free and more varied. In effect, we in DPI are planning now to have these seminars on free and varied press to stimulate an exchange between the various cultural backgrounds of media people. Because they all maybe see media work in different perceptions. So the more we can get them together to communicate together, and I don't talk about North and South and East and West, but I'm talking about journalists

and media people around the world who can communicate with each other and have their cultures. And in fact, I'd like very much, and I'm working very hard to establish a culture of public information in the building and among the media.

CROSSETTE: How about among the Secretariat?

SANBAR: Exactly. Precisely. I agree fully with you.

CROSSETTE: The civil servants --

SANBAR: Exactly.

CROSSETTE: -- the diplomats and others who don't always think this way.

SANBAR: You know, this is one of the greatest challenges, to build a public information culture, an international public information culture. By nature -- and I mentioned before I worked in a peace-keeping operation to help out in the information field -- military people, generals, by nature are not at ease with giving away information, because if you're a military person, a commander, the idea of information flowing out of you to the, quote, "enemy", unquote, is not really that tempting. But when you know that you are peace-keeping, you have no enemy. Everybody is supposed to be your partner. So we should really create that public information culture. Civil servants, diplomats, are always careful about what to say, what not to say. However, we bank on the fact that inside every diplomat there's a journalist trying to get out. [LAUGH]

LITTLEJOHNS: More likely a lawyer.

[LAUGHTER]

Mr. Sanbar, speaking of challenges, what about the financial challenge? The UN is in a terrible financial situation, and I'm sure that your Department is suffering like all the other departments as a result. How are you going to do your job, particularly in this fiftieth anniversary time, with no cash?

SANBAR: You know, as you actually did mention, we have increased demands and decreased resources. And we just have to do a few things. One is to sharpen again the focus on specific items, our priorities. Our priorities, this is where we work. The other thing is to try to increase --

LITTLEJOHNS: I hope **World Chronicle** is one of your priorities.

SANBAR: It is. That's why I'm here. To confirm that. The other thing actually is to try to make joint ventures with the media, media groups and so forth, to see how we can share expenses on the issues. It is not always a question of money, sometimes it's a question of creative suggestions and ideas. Sometimes we have to find ways of working together without paying much money. It's not always money that's the problem, sometimes an idea will come in and replace the need for funds. The third thing is a very famous international approach called other people's money. And you get OPM as much

as possible. We can try, especially with groups that have no negative impact on the UN. So if we can get support from people who realize that the UN is a good prospect for that international role, we try our best.

ROWE: I'm just curious. You have a real problem, in this country at least, with the US Congress. And here's a real challenge for you: There are members of the US Congress who don't think this organization is terribly worthwhile, that it's too expensive, and that it's not terribly representative of American values, et cetera. How do you convince them that this is a worthwhile organization? What is your information strategy for dealing with this?

SANBAR: We have to do our best to try to, A) have the media explain more effectively and widely, through our efforts and through your efforts, what the UN is about, the need for the UN; we have to make contacts that explain in Washington itself through our information office there, and also through the Headquarters, because UN Headquarters is not far from Washington. And we have senior colleagues who would in fact make as many contacts as possible, to explain the UN position and the need for the UN at this particular juncture of US and international history.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you don't do any active lobbying in Washington, do you?

SANBAR: Oh, we're not supposed to interfere in the internal affairs of Member States, but if we have an office in Washington our colleagues should be able to be in touch with Senate members, with congressmen, with journalists, and try to explain as much as possible what our role is.

ROWE: That sounds like a rather modest effort.

SANBAR: Well, give us the tools, we'll try to do the job. We'll try to work with whatever we have. And also we've got to realize that the Government of the United States is also supportive of the UN, it's trying its best to help out. And they're trying to explain what the UN is about. They defend the UN, they criticize it, but they defend it, too. And so our American colleagues, our other colleagues too, everybody in the UN, senior officials, are trying their best.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sanbar, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Samir Sanbar, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information. He was interviewed by Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

* * * * *

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York, 10017, USA.

World Chronicle is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA, or the UN Information Centre in your country.